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THE BIBLE AS A TEXTBOOK IN THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS¹

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The subject is not new. For several years, in one form or other, it has been discussed at both general and special educational meetings, but no satisfactory conclusions have been reached and no action, affecting the public schools in general, has been taken. Fresh interest in the matter has been awakened by recent declarations, in various quarters, to the effect that the boy sent up to college from the schools all over the country is so profoundly ignorant of the Bible that in the interest of his knowledge of English literature, and for the sake of the fine literature of the Bible itself, something must *really* be done by the schools; boys sent to college *must* be able to understand the allusions to the Bible in English literature and *ought* to have some appreciation of the literary quality of the religious Book of the English-speaking race. The remedy suggested for the ailment is the adoption of the Bible as a textbook in the schools.

Let me admit at once, without debate and without question, that the average boy in the high school does not know much of the Bible and not much about it; that his ignorance of it is probably deeper than many of us suppose, but, very likely, not so profound as some have rather vehemently declared. Ignorant no doubt he is, and his ignorance is of two sorts, it must be noticed, quite distinct and separate. I shall, therefore, for the sake of clearness, speak of them one at a time.

There is first his ignorance of biblical allusions found here and there in his English reading, both prose and poetry. It may be worth while to examine this ignorance somewhat carefully for a few minutes to see how profound it is. One of my classes happened recently to be reading *The Merchant of*

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Venice, and there were very few in the class of thirty-five that did not know who Jacob was and who did not know also the particular incident in Jacob's life referred to by Shylock. Most of them knew who the wise mother who "wrought in his behalf" was, but did not know just *how* she wrought. A little farther on, in the second act, perhaps half the class knew who Hagar was, but none knew why Shylock should call Launcelot "that fool of Hagar's offspring." "Jacob's staff" seemed easier than it was, but the significance of the phrase in the passage gave no trouble. "A Daniel come to judgment" of course they did not know, none of them, very likely, ever having read the story of Susanna, in the Old Testament Apocrypha, and the possible allusion to Job, in Lorenzo's speech, Act V, was altogether beyond them. But these, with two more to St. Matthew, constitute all the allusions to the Bible in *The Merchant of Venice* and if the class had not known any of them they would not have missed much of the meaning of the play. In the same drama were to be found allusions to Brutus' Portia, to Jason and his expedition in search of the golden fleece, to Troilus and Cressida, to Thisbe, to Dido, Orpheus, Midas, Diana, and Hercules, and to Medea in her connection with the rejuvenation of Aeson. Brutus' Portia they knew, for they had read Julius Caesar, and some of them knew the story of the Argonautic expedition, but of the others not many had more than heard and few could give the story. Yet quite as much of the play was lost to the class by not knowing these allusions as would have been lost by a complete ignorance of all those to the Bible.

In addition to *The Merchant of Venice* the same class has been reading *The Lady of the Lake*, *Quentin Durward*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. In *The Lady of the Lake*, Scott has two biblical allusions, one to Genesis and one to Proverbs, with another possible one to Deut. 28:67. In *Quentin Durward* only four are plainly given, one to Luke, one to Matthew, and two to Deuteronomy. In *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens has two quotations, one repeated, and six other allusions to the Bible. Here are three authors, one drama, one poem, and two novels, representing one-third of a year's work in a high-school class and

yet the total number of Bible allusions of all kinds in these four books is twenty-one. These books chosen at random, may fairly be said to represent the average of English literature in reference to Bible allusions and the facts need no comment. If it be said that these books give too low an average, take Tennyson, an author who has an exceedingly large number of Bible allusions of all kinds, far, far above the average, some of them extremely obscure. In the one-volume edition of his works (Macmillan), there are nearly 900 octavo pages, double columned, and in all his poems there are almost exactly 300 Bible allusions of all kinds, many of them quite simple like "Rachel at the palmy well," and many of them quotations, often mere phrases, like "carpenter's son" or "poor in spirit." If these allusions were evenly distributed there would be only one in about 300 lines. But in such poems as are read by school children the average is quite below the *general* average, e. g., there are only 29 in the "Idylls of the King," 9 in "The Princess," and 12 in "In Memoriam." But enough has been said on this part of the subject to make it clear that, as a rule, high-school boys understand Bible allusions better than classical, and that the number of allusions to the Bible in good literature is amazingly small and most of them not at all difficult. A good Bible dictionary, a good concordance, and a copy of the Bible itself on the desk of each teacher of English literature, at least, would probably solve the whole difficulty in a very short time, assuming, of course, fair average intelligence and suitable knowledge of the Bible on the part of the teacher.

But if the boy's ignorance of Bible allusion may be thus assisted, easily and naturally, as we assist his ignorance of other things, by dictionary and similar books of reference, his ignorance of the Bible as literature is quite another thing. On this point I am willing to admit that this ignorance is dense and absolute and I have no apology to make for it. Does he know anything else as literature? Why then should anyone insist that he should know the Bible as literature? How many teachers, preachers, professors, lawyers, and other well-educated professional men know the Bible as literature? I wish with all my heart that the boy knew his Bible better, had read it more

as a whole and not in disconnected sections as his Sunday school has compelled him to do for the past thirty years or more, had read it as a *book* merely, and not as a pack-horse of doctrine and denominational interpretation. I wonder sometimes what would happen if for one generation, just as an experiment, church and Sunday school should sit down with their children and lovingly and simply read the Bible as a book without any impudent obtrusion of practical lesson between the Author of the Book and the reader! For all the present ignorance on the part of high-school boys the remedy proposed is the adoption of the Bible as a textbook into the curriculum and some even suggest that no other book be used in the English requirements for college. I am altogether opposed to the remedy offered for the following reasons:

1. No book can be separated from the intent with which it was written and be made to teach that which is only incidental. The intent of the Bible is wholly religious and its literary character altogether incidental. Its purpose, the thread of which runs from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation, is to make God manifest to men to the end that men may come to Him; or if you like to put it the other way it was God making himself manifest to men, by slow and painful process, always accommodating the teaching to man's knowledge, leading him steadily through the ages, to a clearer and clearer knowledge of himself until, in the fulness of time, he made the supreme manifestation of himself in Jesus Christ. This purpose, worked out as it is, by human instruments and always in loving touch with human life, gives the Bible its sanction, makes it the book of which we say with Coleridge "it finds me," and gives it its chief essential literary characteristic, that which lifts its literature above the literature of all other books. Its stories are religious stories, its history religious history, its poetry religious poetry, and its law religious law. The religious purpose and character of the Bible, then, is supreme, and to use it as a textbook in the schools without religious teaching is as impossible as to breathe and not drink in oxygen.

The public high school, the higher educational home of children of all sorts and conditions, and of all names and shades of

religious belief, Greek and Jew, Barbarian and Scythian, bond and free, has done wisely and well to keep out such an element of discord as religious teaching would bring to it. For better, for worse, the Bible may not be used as a textbook in the high school, even for its literature.

2. My second objection to the introduction of the Bible, as a book of literature, into the high school is the kind of teaching it would get. I am aware that it is somewhat fashionable these days to lay much fault-finding at the door of the high-school teacher, particularly of the teacher of English, and I have special reason for not saying anything in this direction not warranted by the strictest adherence to the facts. But, very briefly, we have been trying the experiment of English-literature teaching in the secondary schools for about twenty years. What has been the result? Has it been satisfactory in any way? Who has been pleased with it? The college has not, the schools have not, and I am very, very sure the pupils have not; true, the New England Association of Teachers of English has just said that we must have an entirely new basis for our next experiment in English, which, by the way, is to be begun in 1912, so that the system that we have been laboring under must bear its part of the blame for unsatisfactory results. Yet how many teachers of English are there in the schools who are *successful* teachers of literature, meaning by that, those who have succeeded in awakening in their pupils a real *living* interest in the masterpieces of English they taught, to say nothing of an abiding interest in good literature in general? But many of these teachers have read and studied much of the literature of their own language; few of them have read or studied the Bible in a literary way, perhaps, indeed not in any way except in the desultory, detached way of the Sunday schools hinted at above. To be sure some of the women's colleges have what they call "Bible" in their courses, but no serious-minded person, I should say, speaking from personal knowledge, would ever think of calling the work done under such courses "A Study of the Bible," except by courtesy. To me it has always seemed a beautiful modern example of the practice once followed by certain people of taking tithes of mint,

anise, and cummin and neglecting weightier matters. The men's colleges do not, generally, I believe, do any better in this matter, and I wish to express my belief that at present they are utterly unprepared to do better. With teachers unprepared to instruct in Bible literature, and with colleges unprepared to instruct teachers in the Bible as literature, it seems certainly wise on the part of high schools not to add the Bible to their list of textbooks.

3. The third reason I have to offer in opposition to the adoption of the Bible into the high school as a textbook affects the pupil, the poor victim of all our experiments, the last and least considered, the "forgotten boy." We sit calmly down and think over what the college demands, what we think the boy *ought* to know and make out our course of study in peaceful indifference to his capacities or his dispositions. Happily we *do* learn, even though slowly, and our mistakes of the past twenty years in English literature have, at least, the *promise* of correction, judging by the recent report of the Association already referred to. One of those mistakes was the attempt to make the callow youth understand and appreciate literature quite beyond his capacity, literature that life and experience are needed to appreciate, an attempt that has resulted in a dislike not only for specific masterpieces, but many times in a dislike for great literature in general. I am well aware that a vicious method is to blame for much of this, but fundamentally upon the incapacity of the pupil must rest the failure. Let us not make the same mistake with the greatest of books, at least not till 1912, the time set for beginning all over again in the teaching of English literature.

4. There is a fourth consideration which ought also to make us hesitate in the use of the Bible as a textbook—annotated editions. Evidently we cannot use it in its entirety; it will have to be broken up, and eliminated in parts. Whose edition shall we use? What portions shall be left in, what taken out? Who will edit properly the story of Abraham, of Jacob, of Joseph, of Samson, of Ruth, of David, and of Solomon? Are we to have full length figures of these wonderful characters, or busts, or torsos, to present to our boys and girls? Are we to have the great drama of Job and the Song of Songs edited, or left out?

And when editions begin to flood the market which shall we use: that which says leave all in except the genealogical tables and the muster rolls, or that which expurgates or emends somewhat after the fashion of the emendation and expurgation of Shakespeare? Of which church is the editor to be, or of which denomination? Is he to be clergyman or layman? Is the theological professor to be ruled out at one end of the line and the school man at the other? Shall we have some committee sit on this question, or some association decide it, or boards of education pass upon it, or each headmaster with his teachers select for himself and his school? Our present editing is bad enough confusion, but "confusion worse confounded" would only feebly express the condition if the Bible as a textbook were in question.

Lastly, I wish to call your attention to a feeling about the Bible: a feeling born of sacred memories and the experiences of life, and rooted deep in the hearts of millions of those whose children are in the public schools. It may be *only* a feeling and probably not anything resembling a conclusion arrived at by reasoning; indeed, it may be quite unreasoning. It is to be found among men and women of all classes, because the Bible touches all of us on the plane of our common humanity, but is strongest, I should say, among that great body of plain people who probably never think of their Bible as a literary work. To these men and women the Bible has become the Book of Life, a book that is a real light to their path in all the ways of life, a word which, hidden in their hearts, keeps their feet from falling, their eyes from tears, and their souls from death. It is to them, in truth, God's Word, made sacred to them in all the ways in which a soul comes to and walks with its Maker; the Word that stays and steadies in the crises of life, that comforts in the days of darkness, and that gives hope for the future. To them the use of the Bible as a textbook seems a desecration, almost a sacrilege. We may think whatever we will of this feeling, but in any serious consideration of the subject before us it must be respected and reckoned with.

But on such a question as this before us today no discussion ought to close without some helpful suggestions. That the boys

and girls of the high school are much too ignorant of the Bible is not to be successfully denied, and that they were much better acquainted with it all of us wish. How shall such better knowledge be brought about? (1) In the matter of allusions, let me repeat, I should have upon the desk of every teacher of English, at least, a copy of the Bible, a copy of some good Bible concordance, and one of a good Bible dictionary. (2) If possible, I should have every teacher of English well acquainted with the Bible as a *necessary* part of the preparation to teach English literature. On the subject of the Bible as a literary book the solution of this problem, as indeed of all school problems, must come from the teacher. At present our teachers are wholly unprepared and, more serious still, our colleges, too, for the one sufficient reason that the Bible, in the study of English literature, has been practically left out. The method of adopting the book as a textbook and thus *compelling* the teacher's preparation, the high schools are shut out from. I believe the method to be a vicious one and I point to our present work in literature as sufficient basis for such belief. The high schools, therefore, must place their entire dependence upon the teacher and the method of indirection. As soon as teachers themselves realize the fine literary quality of the Bible and set earnestly to work upon the study of it as a book of literature, and as soon as the colleges fit themselves to be of service to teachers in this business, and not until then, may we hope for any better condition in the high school than we now have.